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US shows 'evidence' that USSR uses toxins

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WASHINGTON - The State Department asserted yesterday that for the first time it has what it considers "convincing evidence" that the Soviet Union has been using banned lethal toxin weapons against Moslem insurgents in Afghanistan.

Two gas masks, obtained in separate intelligence operations inside Afghanistan, contained traces of trichothecene mycotoxins, the State Department said. One was taken from the body of a Soviet soldier, a department official said.

One of the gas masks was displayed - in a sealed plexiglass case - at the end of a State Department briefing on a report sent to Congress and the United Nations yesterday by Secretary of State George P. Shultz.

Noting that the 1925 Geneva Protocol forbids the use of chemical and biological weapons and that the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention prohibits "mere possession" of toxin weapons, Shultz said:

"The world cannot be silent in the face of such human suffering and such cynical disregard for international law and agreements.

"The use of chemical and toxin weapons must be stopped. Respect for existing agreements must be restored and the agreements themselves strengthened."

Robert Dean, a deputy director in the State Department's Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs, said that since the United States first lengthy allegations on the use of lethal agents in Laos and Cambodia and Afghanistan last March, there has been no world outcry and intelligence reports indicate continued use of such weapons in all three places as recently as last month.

He said the United States will continue to present evidence and speak out on the issue until the use of illegal agents is halted. He also appealed to countries that have conducted independent investigations to present their evidence and publicly condemn the Soviet Union and Vietnam.

Only Canada, Thailand and Britain have either spoken out or presented evidence, he said. Dean said the Soviets deny using the weapons. "We have raised this repeatedly with the Soviets, and their response is to deny it," he said.

The 12-page State Department report said

that one of the gas masks was obtained near Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, in September 1981 and the other was taken from a dead Soviet soldier three months later. New analytic techniques, the report said, confirmed the presence on both masks of lethal toxins of the type previously alleged to have been used in Laos and Cambodia. A knowledgeable official privately explained that more precise information on the operations mounted to obtain the two masks was difficult to make public, since they were obtained in US intelligence missions using Afghan personnel. Other countries have mounted similar operations, he said, but as yet have been reluctant to come forward.

Dean said the United States supports an effort to name a permanent panel of scientific specialists to be available to the UN secretary general to investigate future allegations of the use of banned chemical and toxin weapons.

It also supports the reconvening of the Biological Convention to try to write tough verification and compliance provisions into the 10-year-old agreement. But he stressed that the United States will continue to pursue various other arms control agreements with the Soviet Union, insisting on strong verification provisions.

Dean was flanked by a panel of US specialists on chemical and biological warfare. One of them, Gary Crocker of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, said that Soviet military doctrine has long called for use of chemical and toxin agents against dug-in forces who could not be reached by other means, except at heavy loss of life. Use of such weapons in Afghanistan, Laos and Cambodia, he said, has not been small-scale and experimental.

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but widespread and operational.

The mask displayed at the briefing was said to have been obtained in Kabul. It was sealed, a spokesman said, to prevent the residual agents from causing any illness in the briefing room.

The mask was of tight-fitting tan canvas, with built-in glass goggles and a rubber hose connected to an olive-brown cannister described as "the latest cannister being used by the Soviets."

The Shultz report also talked of a mysterious agent used in Afghanistan as recently as September of this year which caused the bodies of victims to decompose rapidly - "the flesh peeled away when attempts were made to move the bodies."

"There is no recognized class of chemical or biological toxin agents we know of that could affect bodies in such a way," the study declared.



Soviet-made gas mask, said to have been found in Afghanistan, was displayed at press conference yesterday.

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